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FM AMCONSUL CHENGDU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2355  
INFO RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 2838  
RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENGDU 000013

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/11/2027  
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SUBJECT: HOW "HARMONIOUS" ARE SICHUAN'S TIBETAN AREAS?

REF: 05 CHENGDU 322

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, United States  
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Social unrest in Tibetan areas of Sichuan Province was serious in the first half of 2006, according to an ethnic Tibetan researcher from the Tibet Study Institute of Sichuan University. Ten "mass incidents" involving over 800 people principally stemmed from conflicts in caterpillar fungus-growing areas, distribution of grassland, and migration and relocation due to development of hydropower resources. The economically focused conflicts generally occurred seasonally in rural areas. Speaking frankly at a local conference in Chengdu, the researcher opined that public security authorities were ineffective mediators for political and historical reasons and that religious figures should play more of a role in resolving disputes. Such mass incidents will likely continue, and be quickly quashed by authorities, with the continued resettlement of Tibetan nomads into areas in which there will realistically be few jobs or other economic opportunities. End Summary.

#### Background

¶2. (SBU) Consulate recently attended a December 9-11 conference in Chengdu on "Social Changes and Development in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and other Tibetan Areas," co-organized by the Social Economic Research Institute of the China Center for Tibet Study and the Tibet Study Institute of Sichuan University. Over 100 people from the TAR and other Tibetan areas attended the conference. Approximately 70 scholars, 8-10 of whom were ethnic Tibetans, presented academic papers. The main themes of the conference were the construction of a "harmonious society," economic development, poverty alleviation, NGO involvement in Tibetan areas, health care and environmental protection. This cable will focus on economic and social issues relating to the implementation of harmonious society in Tibetan areas of Sichuan. The issues of health care and non-governmental organizations are reported septel.

#### Economic and Social Pressures Lead to Unrest

¶3. (SBU) According to Tashi Dhundrup, an Associate Researcher of the Sichuan Provincial Tibetan Study Institute, under the Sichuan United Front Work Department, the principle causes of social unrest in Tibetan areas of Sichuan Province stem from conflicts in caterpillar fungus and mushroom-growing areas, distribution of grassland, and disputes in the lumber industry.

Additionally, migration and relocation resulting from construction of hydropower stations and tourism planning are also creating economic pressure and social disturbances.

¶4. (SBU) The population of Tibetan areas of Sichuan Province (Ganzi and Aba Prefectures) is approximately 1.9 million, 1.35 million of whom are ethnic Tibetans. Tashi Dhundrup reported statistics from the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Public Security Bureau (PSB) showing ten cases of "mass incidents" between January and June 2006. According to data he cited, approximately 880 people participated in the ten recent incidents, 3 died and 4 were wounded. Nine of the incidents were categorized as economic disputes.

#### Caterpillar Fungus

¶5. (SBU) Tashi Dhundrup said that on May 24, 2006, one person was shot to death and seven were wounded in a conflict about the allocation of caterpillar fungus growing-areas between Sade Township of Kangding County and Ba Yorong Township of Nyachu Ka County, in Ganzi Prefecture. (Note: the price of caterpillar fungus fluctuates widely. In 2005, it reportedly sold for 20,000 RMB (USD 2,400) per kg. A recent Chinese press report stated the price had risen to 80,000 RMB (USD 9,600) per kg. Regardless of the price, it has always been viewed as a valuable economic commodity. Reftel. End Note)

#### Grassland Distribution

¶6. (SBU) On June 24, 1996, according to Tashi Dhundrup, a large-scale mass conflict occurred over grassland distribution between Medo Township of Hongyuan County and Sedi Township of Zungchu (Ch: Song Pan) County, in Aba Prefecture. As a result, 13 people were killed. He said that according to local officials, between 2002 and 2005, 20 people were killed due to a continuing conflict over grassland rights.

#### Hydropower Development

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¶7. (SBU) Tibetan areas in Sichuan are extremely rich in water resources. Tashi Dhundrup said a great number of hydropower development projects are taking place in 12 counties of Sichuan's two Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, leading to a series of conflicts between developers and local inhabitants. In Truchu County (Ch: Heishui) in Aba Prefecture, where seven hydropower stations are under construction, the issue of relocation compensation prompted unrest (septel). Local people have attacked construction workers and stopped projects. Some dissatisfied residents have come to Chengdu to complain to the provincial government, but have not had their concerns addressed, according to Tashi Dhundrup.

#### Seasonal Conflicts in Rural Areas

¶8. (SBU) After analyzing the recent mass incidents, Tashi Dhundrup concluded the following:

- Most of the incidents are seasonal conflicts. May-June is caterpillar fungus-collecting season. Conflicts over grassland distribution occur in July during the time when nomads move from winter to summer pasture. August-September is the high season for mushroom harvesting.
- Of the 30 counties in Tibetan areas of Sichuan Province, 73 percent have had disputes over grassland distribution. 80 percent have had conflicts over the collection of caterpillar-fungus. 60 percent have had disturbances over mushroom harvesting.
- According to statistics from the Ganzi Prefecture PSB, the number of participants in mass incidents reached over 50 people in 80 percent of the cases.
- 98 percent of the mass incidents in Ganzi Prefecture occurred

in rural (nomadic and farming) areas rather than in urban areas.

#### Public Security Officers Ineffective as Mediators

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¶9. (SBU) Tashi Dhundrup said all of these incidents appear to be related to economic, political and historical, as well as policy issues. He stated that the majority of rural people are poorly educated, do not have legal knowledge and do not respect the police. As a result, he concluded it is very hard for public security officers to act as mediators in addressing these conflicts.

#### Religious Figures Should Play Role in Resolution

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¶10. (SBU) Tashi Dhundrup suggested that religious figures play a more active role in resolution of such disputes by using their position of respect from the masses. He also hoped the authorities would confiscate weapons from the local population as firearms have frequently been used during mass incidents. He indicated most guns come from Gansu, Qinghai and Yunnan Provinces, and that they have been increasing in Ganzi Prefecture in the last few years.

¶11. (C) Comment: The public discussion of social unrest in Tibetan areas of Sichuan Province was unusually frank (especially in light of the invitation for the Consulate to attend) and quite telling of an unbalanced social and economic situation, the details of which rarely reach the press. The openness was likely due to the almost entirely local composition of the audience -- principally ethnic Han academics. Such mass incidents will likely continue with the resettlement of Tibetan nomads away from traditional pasturelands into areas where they will realistically have few jobs or other economic opportunities. The Government will also continue to tightly clamp down on the disturbances in Tibetan areas in order to convey the appearance of social "harmony."

BOUGHNER